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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 002162

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/15/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [TU](#) [PTER](#) [SYRIA](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH PRESIDENT SEZER'S TRIP TO SYRIA

REF: A. DAMASCUS 1833

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 1688

(U) Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Sezer's April 13-14 visit appears indeed to have been symbolic (ref A), aside from his short one-on-one meeting with Asad. Turkish MFA officials are claiming that Sezer urged Asad to finish Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon by the end of the month and received Asad's pledge to do so. The Turks portray the visit as providing more impetus for what they assert is Asad's push for reforms. End Summary.

Lebanon

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[1](#)2. (C) MFA Middle East DG Celikkol asserted to DCM that in their one-on-one meeting, Sezer told Asad Syria should completely withdraw military and intelligence units from Lebanon before Lebanese elections. Asad reportedly replied they would be out well before April 30 and that he will call Sezer when the pullout is finished. Asad told Sezer that when the pullout is complete, Syria will seek a UNSCR saying it has fulfilled UNSCR 1559; failing a UNSCR, the Syrians will seek a UNSC Presidential statement.

[1](#)3. (C) Asad omitted the mention of the Lebanon discussion from his press statement after the Sezer meeting; Celikkol was quick to point out that Sezer mentioned Lebanon in his statement.

[1](#)4. (C) There was no discussion of internal Lebanese politics; neither side raised Hizbullah nor upcoming elections.

Syria's Internal Reforms

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[1](#)5. (C) Sezer reportedly encouraged Asad to "continue" with internal reforms. Celikkol said Asad told Sezer he would undertake more reforms starting with the Ba'ath Party Congress (ref B). With great satisfaction, Celikkol claimed that Sezer's visit had strengthened the hand of Asad and other reformers against hardliners who want to maintain the status quo. Celikkol recalled that during his 2004 visit to Turkey, Asad told him at the airport that he had seen a modern and advanced Turkey, different from what some advisors had told him. This, Celikkol concluded, demonstrates the importance of the Turkish/Syrian contact for reformists.

Terrorism

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[1](#)6. (C) Asad raised the possibility of bilateral cooperation against what he termed "fundamentalist terrorism." According to Celikkol, Asad told Sezer that "not every Ba'athist is a Saddamist" and the two countries should work together to encourage secularists. Sezer reportedly replied that Turkey is pleased with SARG cooperation against the PKK but that Syria needs to cooperate against terrorism with "other countries."

[1](#)7. (C) Comment: Turkish MFA is promoting the Sezer visit as a net positive for -- as the MFA asserts -- strengthening Asad. FM Gul has asserted publicly, as the MFA declared to us again after this visit, that Asad should be supported as a reformer. What the visit achieved in material terms for Turkey is an open question, but several leading Turkish columnists, including commentators often critical of the U.S., have sharply criticized Sezer for going and questioned why Turkey should put itself in the position of helping Asad break his isolation. At the same time, given a renewed left- and right-nationalist surge in Turkey, many in the Turkish state and public see another positive to the visit: assertion of Turkish independence of action. End Summary.

EDELMAN